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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, school-community partnerships increased nationwide, prompted by diminishing federal and state financial support for education, increasing numbers of at-risk students, and initiatives promoting local decision-making. Numerous examples in the literature portray partnerships involving "adoption" of schools by businesses, school use of mentors or volunteers, provision of financial incentives to students, and school-to-work transition. However, most examples have a decidedly urban focus, and students with disabilities are seldom targeted. Although rural areas have unique problems that may hinder the development of partnerships, this paper offers the more optimistic view that rural areas also possess unique resources upon which successful partnerships can be built. A primary advantage of rural areas is the synergistic relationship between the school and the community that it serves. This synergy is evident in the informality of rural community politics, accessibility of individuals to each other regardless of position, acquaintanceship of parents of disabled students, rural-oriented work ethic, and ease with which local resources can be identified and accessed. Examples of rural partnerships that facilitate the postsecondary transition to work of disabled and special needs students include a regional skills training program held at community sites and businesses in rural eastern Oregon, and two instances in which community coalitions made possible the supported employment and eventual independence of developmentally disabled persons in rural Mississippi. (SV)

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INFUSING RURAL SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS INTO TRANSITION COMPONENTS OF INDIVDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS: PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

During the 1980s a reformed vision of education was spawned that, by the end of the decade, was evidenced in schools throughout the nation. Due to diminishing federal and state fiscal resources, concern over increasing indicators associated with at-risk students, and emerging initiatives promoting local educational decision making, school-community partnerships grew nationwide. These partnerships typically focused on one of four themes: 1) "adopting" schools by businesses or communities, 2) using mentors or volunteers from the community or private sector, 3) providing incentives to students through grants or loans for continuing their education, and 4) introducing students to the world of work (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987).

Examples of existing school-community partnerships portray these various themes, often emphasizing a public-private sector marriage to facilitate students' successful post-secondary school transition into the workforce. The Boston Compact is a joint effort between the Boston schools and nearly 350 businesses to raise achievement levels of students in return for hiring priorities for graduates and summer jobs for qualified students (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987; Silver, 1990). In Atlanta, Rich's Department Stores has established an academy in renovated store space to assist youth involved with the juvenile justice system. School personnel work with store employees in teaching remedial academics, and management of personal and legal problems (Zimmerman, 1987). Florida's Dade County Schools and the South Florida Employment and Training Consortium have collaborated to increase youth employment and graduation rates of at-risk 9th and 10th grade students. Students receive remedial instruction and counseling, while mentors guide them in developing career goals (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987). Champion International, a paper making corporation invested $2 million with the Stamford, Connecticut schools which was used to hire a full-time consultant, finance a summer school for low achieving students, and sponsor bi-weekly training sessions for every teacher in four newly built middle schools. Since the middle schools opened in 1990, attendance rates have doubled, 15 of 18 summer school students are on the honor roll, and 93% of the parents report that their children are happy at school ("Saving Our Schools," 1992). Parental and community involvement is also a key component of the Accelerated Schools movement ("True or False," 1993).

While the efforts and success of these and other school-community partnerships are exemplary in promoting achievement among

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at-risk youth, there is a decidedly urban focus to their implementation. One possible reason for this emphasis is the fact that private sector perspectives often reflect the urban areas in which businesses are located (Vermilion, 1986). In addition, much publicity has been given to the large numbers of at-risk children and youth in our nation's urban centers (see, for example, Maeroff, 1988). These efforts to address the problems of urban schools should not be minimized, however, it is worth noting that rural schools still bear a significant responsibility in educating America's youth. Even though approximately 62% of the *school children* in the United States come from non-rural areas (Pepple, Law, & Kallembach, 1990), nearly 60% of the nation's *school districts* are rural with three-quarters of their students living in towns with fewer than 2,500 residents (Spicker, 1992). In fact, many of these rural districts must attend to problems and issues similar to those of their non-rural counterparts.

Another problem with some current school-community partnerships is that while they often target at-risk populations, students with disabilities may not be included unless they are also considered to be "at risk." With regard to successful post-secondary transition, students with disabilities *should* be considered at risk. Follow-up studies of high school leavers with identified disabilities have typically found elevated rates of unemployment and underemployment as these individuals enter young adulthood (see, for example, Edgar, 1987; Halpern & Benz, 1987; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Hasazi, Gordon, Roe, Hull, Finck, & Salembier, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985; Sitlington & Frank, 1989; Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1990, 1991).

While not as numerous as examples from urban areas, reports of rural school-community partnerships show promising results. Martin (1986) discussed the positive outcomes of community-based cooperative education in a rural Maine school district. A partnership between a rural school and a local, family-owned dairy facilitated achievement-oriented and positive workplace behaviors for a student with special learning and behavioral needs (Martin & Elrod, 1989). A partnership among an institution of higher education, school districts, and community businesses fostered competitive employment opportunities for developmentally disabled, learning disabled, and behavior disordered youth in northern Utah (Curl, Hall, Chisholm, & Rule, 1991).

The establishment of school-community partnerships in rural areas does have unique problems that must be addressed before successful implementation is possible. Specific constraints in developing rural community-based supported employment options include: long distances between work sites (with limited available transportation services), limited economic diversity, and low population density (Markve, Morris, Ferrara, & Rudrud, 1992).

Therefore, it is with an acknowledgement of the spectrum of problems and issues that confront rural areas that this article offers a different, more optimistic view of implementing school-community partnerships. Specifically, this view emphasizes the resources that rural areas possess upon which a foundation can be built to develop successful partnerships. This foundation targets the partnership theme of introducing students to the world of work

while, simultaneously, fulfilling the transition plan mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Congress, 1990).

Designing Rural School-Community Partnerships

Designing rural school-community partnerships must be based on a foundation built upon the advantages that rural areas possess. The following section discusses these advantages while offering examples of rural school-community partnerships that facilitate the post-secondary transition of special needs students.

Synergistic Advantages of Rural Areas

While rural areas have certain hindrances to implementing school-community partnerships for post-secondary transition training, specific *advantages* exist that can facilitate such linkages. Though rural areas may not have the population, economic, or physical resources of their urban or suburban counterparts, it is much easier to identify the "school community" in rural areas. If school communities are, indeed, composed of "families of children who attend [school] and their immediate neighbors" (Litwak & Meyer, 1974, p.1), then, for many rural areas, the school community is synonymous with the local community. Thus, all children in the local community attend school in the same system and that system responds to the needs of the local community. This synergistic relationship translates into an "ownership" of the rural school by citizens of the local community. It is with a synergistic perception of rural areas, therefore, that the following advantages have been identified.

Less formal politics. Rural community politics is much less formal than in metropolitan areas, thus opening up community systems to the general citizenry. These systems can provide educators with the opportunity to effect system-wide change. Local governing bodies (e.g. town councils) routinely hold open-door community meetings to enlist support for special projects or to solicit community input into the decision-making process. Through this open-door process, rural educators and advocates can solicit support for school improvement issues and school-community partnerships.

Accessibility of non-school personnel. In rural communities it is not difficult to get to know many of the individuals responsible for non-school services (e.g. the local grocer or the manager of the hardware store). Private sector and school personnel often know each other on a personal level, see each other regularly at community functions and can formulate agreements on a "hand shake" rather than formal, written contracts. When individuals attend the same churches and participate in local community activities together, the formality of maintaining the necessary contacts becomes more relaxed.

Acquaintanceship of parents. In smaller, rural communities, most parents of students with disabilities know each other. This acquaintanceship facilitates parent cooperation and advocacy which can yield considerable weight in effecting positive program initiatives such as school-community partnerships.

Rural-oriented work ethic. Rural areas are built on a

foundation of hands-on physical labor. Albeit sometimes seasonal, work is the cornerstone of the daily lives of rural families. Schedules are often set to revolve around planting, harvesting or "haying." Thus, the value of work at home, in the community, and at school is a constant theme in rural environs.

Resource identification. With a much smaller private sector on which to draw, the identification of resources to be activated in a transition plan is less time consuming. Often, as will be evidenced in an example cited below, the proprietors and patrons of rural businesses take direct "ownership" and pride in being included in school-community partnerships.

Examples of Rural School-Community Partnerships

Both rural and remote school districts have been able to implement community partnerships to facilitate the post-secondary transition of students with disabilities as evidenced in the following examples.

Skills Training Program, Union (OR) Educational Service District (ESD). The Union ESD based in La Grande, Oregon, provides regional transition training for Baker, Union, and Wallowa Counties of eastern Oregon. The mission of the Skills Training Program is "to assist students in acquiring employable skills through a coordinated effort among the school district, vocational trainer/teacher, employers, and parents (Union Educational Service District, 1991, p. 1). During the 1990-1991 school year, the Skills Training Program was able to outreach to rural and remote communities of the three-county consortium and serve 45 students. Thirty-three community sites were used as placement facilities with both public (e.g. public libraries) and private (e.g. small businesses such as Oregon Trail Bicycles) sector sites participating.

Two cases from rural Mississippi. The following descriptions of community-based programs for two students with developmental disabilities emanate from rural, eastern Mississippi.

Rhonda is a 20 year old female receiving special services under the category, "educable mentally retarded." Her transition plan focuses on the skills necessary to obtain a position at a local fast food restaurant. Some of the skills identified for successful job performance included: punctuality, attendance, appearance, attitude, use of public transportation (a mini-bus provided for the elderly and disabled), and completion of assigned tasks. Through supported employment, Rhonda was able to solidify these skills on the job, allowing for feedback from the work setting.

Because a job coach was unavailable, Rhonda's special education teacher, her case manager from Community Counseling Services, and the staff of the fast food restaurant joined forces to provide training and support on the job site until Rhonda became independent as a worker. A transition team composed of Rhonda, her mother, her case manager, her special education teacher, a representative from Vocational Rehabilitation, a vocational counselor, and the bus driver meet periodically to review her progress and assess the need for continued support. Through team meetings, service providers are able to understand and internalize

their roles in Rhonda's post-secondary transition. As Rhonda completed her first year of employment, her special education teacher/job coach gradually began to withdraw his presence on the job site to permit Community Counseling Services to assume supervisory responsibility. In the final two weeks of Rhonda's first year on the job, much of the needed "support" only amounted to occasional phone calls to the employer to verify her continued success.

Wayne is a 23 year old male with Down Syndrome. As he approached high school entry, the rural school district in which he was enrolled was faced with the issue of having only a few special students functioning at Wayne's level. A cooperative agreement was arranged among the special education, vocational education and home economics programs at the high school. When this agreement was implemented, Wayne began to receive instruction in basic laundry skills, food management, and home repairs. Upon completion of this tailored program, Wayne received training through Vocational Rehabilitation and job coaching from Community Counseling Services. Wayne was employed at a local market and his life appeared to be in order until the opening of a large supermarket caused the unforeseen closure of the local market. These events left Wayne and other former employees of the local market unemployed.

Being a resident of a small, rural community, Wayne's plight was recognized by a number of local citizens and former patrons of the local market. The local chapter of the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) was asked to devise a strategy to facilitate Wayne's future and continued employment. Managers of the new supermarket received constant phone calls from ARC members and the manager and patrons of the local market concerning Wayne and his misfortune. While there was a large applicant pool for positions at the new store, Wayne was hired and reported to work shortly after the store's grand opening. When asked about the ARC's response to Wayne's situation, the local chapter president replied, "We take care of our own."

Discussion

Developing rural school - community partnerships for students with disabilities is a lesson in perception. The glass may be viewed as either "half empty" or "half full." By adopting an optimistic, "half full", orientation to the advantages that do exist in rural areas, a school - community synergy emerges on which partnerships can be developed. The crux of this synergy is not facility driven, but human driven. It is based on the informal, personal, family- and work-oriented milieu of rural areas. It is characterized by a willingness to help and become involved. Often, the fate of the status of a program comes down to one person, or a collection of individuals, finding the will, the time, and the motivation to "make do." Whether based on a consortium model, as in the example from eastern Oregon, or on individual cases, as exemplified in Mississippi, rural school-community partnerships can be effectively implemented for students with disabilities. Rural educators must look past downsized physical resources in their areas and explore the wealth of human resources ready to assist, if given the opportunity. When rural special educators view a half-

filled glass, they must think "synergy" and take advantage of the human resources that are available in their communities.

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